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MISSISSIPPI VALLEY PROBLEMS AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION¹

Think of the West and the Revolution and what name or event occurs to your mind? A mental test, you ask? Well, yes, something like that. Your answer, without doubt, is "George Rogers Clark and the conquest of Kaskaskia." That name and that event have been so heralded by history, idealized in novels, and sung in metrical measure, that almost everybody with a pretence to culture would blush for ignorance of the outstanding facts or fancies connected with them. So dramatic was Clark's expedition, and so seemingly momentous, that even the eastern historians who know little or nothing concerning the West make room forcibly for a brief account of it between the stories of Valley Forge and the southern campaigns, whereas western historians in their enthusiasm trace to the success of Clark most of the benefits accruing to us from the Revolutionary War.

It would not be surprising, therefore, if many of you upon reading or hearing the title of my paper have prepared yourselves for the arousing of your imaginations with an impassioned and rhetorical review of the events connected with the occupation of the Illinois country by the Virginians during the most romantic period of American history. I am sorry to disappoint you. Although I have been guilty of adding many printed pages to the bulky volume of Clark literature, I have decided not to increase its size today. The names Clark and Kaskaskia may have raised intriguing images in your minds, but they must function like the announcement of a future picture attraction at the movies; for no sooner have your eyes fastened upon the advertisement than you are compelled to let the reel roll on to the movie of the day.

¹ Read at the annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, January 9, 1922.

I fear that the movie which I am about to produce will prove about as exciting and hair raising as a scenario of that popular work of fiction entitled *The Education of Henry Adams*. Still I will beg you not to be too doleful over this billboard announcement, for, although I shall not depict Clark and his officers tripping a minuet with the olive-skinned beauties of Kaskaskia, I promise to introduce some close-ups of painted Indians, buck-skin clad pioneers, land-speculators, and muddling empire-builders. It is not exactly a wild west show which I am promising you, but it is a jamboree with some jazz.

The situation in the Mississippi Valley before and during the Revolutionary War was not so simple as usually described by historians, nor were the issues raised so trivial. In fact the situation was inextricably complex and the issues most vital for the future welfare of the new state that was in the making. In the short time at my disposal, however, I can do no more than present to you an outline of the most significant complexities of the western conditions, and I must limit myself in general to the period preceding the outbreak of the war.

By the treaty of peace in 1763 which brought to an end the French and Indian War, the British Empire was acknowledged to extend westward to the Mississippi River; and from France there was further received Canada and from Spain, Florida, or, since this term is today more limited in its territorial significance, the gulf coast. To the politicians at Westminster this newly acquired territory presented for the next eleven years a most perplexing problem, and whenever they soberly and seriously discussed the question of the American colonies, the vital phase to them was not the disturbances of the "madding crowd" of Boston and New York but the development of this vast transmontane region, where dwelt the American Indians but into which the white men were inexorably pressing in increasing numbers with a consequent disturbance of the equilibrium. American historians have fastened their eyes so attentively on the popular outbursts of the East over the stamp tax, the Townshend taxes, and the tea ships that

they have failed to grasp much of the significance of British colonial legislation.

Every extension of the British Empire has brought with it heavy financial burdens to the people of the island. Civil government and military and naval protection for the expanding imperial territory have been furnished by the mother country. It is only in recent years that the discovery of the secret of local autonomy for the dominions has alleviated to any extent the burden of the British taxpayer. Let us remember the difficulties of this subject before we condemn the eighteenth-century politicians for their failure to solve a new and almost inexplicable problem.

Before the French and Indian War was over it was evident to the imperialists of Westminster that the new territory to be acquired must be defended by the imperial might; British troops must be maintained in Canada, in Florida, and in the Mississippi Valley to defend the territory from France, from Spain, and from the American Indians. For this purpose it was determined to scatter ten thousand troops in small detachments throughout the newly acquired territory. For instance, there was to be a body of troops in Canada, but from there detachments should be sent to occupy forts at Niagara, Detroit, Machinac, Green Bay, and several smaller posts in the Ohio Valley. The Illinois country was connected for military purposes with Pittsburg, whence troops were sent to Fort de Chartres. In a similar way military centers were created on the lower Mississippi and along the gulf coast. Besides the defense from foreign nations and the Indians that would be secured by this distribution of the troops, it was expected that the merchants engaged in the fur trade would be assisted in their operations and that the gradual and controlled creation of new colonies in the Mississippi Valley would be promoted.

This distribution of troops in small detachments separated from the settled region by wide stretches of wilderness was very expensive, far more so than their concentration near the populous towns would have been. Then too, the cost of the

new colonies which it was proposed to erect in Canada and the Floridas must be paid for at first out of the imperial exchequer. It was estimated that the new burden which would thus be placed upon the taxpayers of the empire would amount to about three hundred thousand pounds. This additional expense was undertaken for the welfare of the colonies. Was it fair, asked the politicians, that people living in England, Scotland, and Wales should pay the whole bill? The answer was naturally in the negative; and so it was decided that the colonies should pay one-third of the expense for maintaining the army. The result was, as you know, the passing of the stamp tax, which must be placed in the succession of causes that led to the later revolt of the colonies.

The outcry aroused by this piece of legislation is well known. The colonies united in resistance. This story we must pass by; but we are interested in the fact that the decision to employ this means of taxing the colonies arose out of the conditions existing in the Mississippi Valley. It was a western issue, not an eastern.

Out of the very same conditions came the next dispute between the colonies and the mother country. The repeal of the stamp tax had cut off a supply of money which was to be appropriated for colonial defense and the promotion of colonies in the Mississippi Valley. What now was to be done? Over this question politicians in England divided. Those who had repealed the stamp tax proposed that nothing should be done; the troops should be withdrawn from the West and concentrated in the populated areas where their support would cost less, and the merchants engaged in the fur trade should be prohibited from going beyond the mountains. Let the Indians come to the colonies, if they wished to trade. Of course this policy included the prohibition of all colonizing activities. The Mississippi Valley was to be left a huge Indian reservation from which all white men should be excluded. In this way the expense of the colonies could be curtailed. The exigencies of politics make strange bedfellows, it is said. On this new

plank in the colonial platform stood also the former sponsors for the stamp tax — they were naturally resentful over the repeal and were willing to make a difficult condition even more difficult. They took their stand, therefore, by the side of those who were responsible for the repeal of that measure so obnoxious to the colonies. Both groups of politicians were now in the opposition.

In power was the famous William Pitt, recently created the Earl of Chatham, a friend of the American colonies and one of the few men of eighteenth-century England with clairvoyant power to foresee the future development of the British Empire. He had placed in charge of the department under whose supervision came the colonies a friend and enthusiastic follower, the young Earl of Shelburne, whom Benjamin Disraeli, also a prime minister of England, called "the ablest and most accomplished minister of the eighteenth century." This young lord studied the American problem with his characteristically painstaking care and wrote down this conclusion: "There is no doubt but that the minister who could lessen the American expence, or who could establish an American fund adequate to such expence would do his country a very essential service." Lord Shelburne preferred increasing the imperial funds to cutting down expenses. He worked out a system of land sales, similar in character to that devised later by the United States. By means of selling to the Americans what they most wanted he calculated that the empire would secure a large sum of money which could be employed to advance the interests of the colonies. To put this scheme into execution, he proposed the creation of three new colonies, one centered around Detroit, one in the Illinois country, and one below the mouth of the Ohio River. This plan was finally accepted by the ministry and King George III during the year 1767.

Meanwhile another member of this same Chatham ministry, Charles Townshend, was considering the problem of the West from another angle. He preferred the other alternative, the

cutting down of expenses, and readily accepted the policy of the opposition, the abandonment of the Mississippi Valley to the Indians. On the floor of the House of Commons, under the hectoring of the opposition, he declared himself in favor of a retrenchment of the expense of the army by concentrating it on the seaboard and thus he placed himself on the side of those who would prohibit the expansion of the white population west of the mountains. If this method of retrenchment should be inaugurated he promised to find a means of raising money in the colonies to meet a part of the remaining expense. These promises were made by Townshend without previous consultation with his colleagues, who were panic stricken at hearing the chancellor of the exchequer thus speak. Chatham was very ill at the time and had not met with his cabinet for many weeks. The crisis called him from his sick bed. He had but one piece of advice: "Get rid of Townshend," and with this advice the king was in full agreement. Unfortunately Chatham's candidate, Lord North, would not accept the position. Chatham was too ill to take further action and so the ministry had to make a choice between the policies of the two rival officials, Shelburne and Townshend.

The momentous cabinet meeting where the final decision was reached was held on March 30, 1767. Lord Shelburne — never trusted nor understood by his colleagues, for he had a contempt for both their morals and their intellects — read a very able paper in which he expounded his proposed measures. Townshend had one reply to make. "I have promised the House of Commons," he said. The final decision of the cabinet took the form of a compromise, as might be expected. Shelburne's plan for the development of the West was accepted, but as a sop to Townshend he was permitted to introduce his ill-omened taxes, one of which was the irritating one on tea. No minister, except Townshend, believed in his puerile taxes — a policy "too lightly adopted . . . before it had been well weighed," wrote Shelburne — and everybody expected that these taxes would soon be re-

pealed. Yet it was three years before the repeal and then the job was only partially done. The tax on tea remained as a constant irritant to a hypersensitive colonial population.

It was such irritating puerility of British ministries that called from the robust and virile Colonel Barré at a later date his famous outburst of indignation: "A few years ago, the genius of a minister supported by your fleet and armies, set you at the head of the world. The East and West Indies were in your hands. Your infant hands were not able to grasp the world. Instead of that, you have been pursuing small criminals. Instead of giving law to the world, you have, like the Roman emperor, been staying at home, catching and torturing flies."

For the moment, in spite of the Townshend taxes, the proponent of a policy which would guide, direct, and foster the colonial forces instead of curbing them by force, had triumphed. Shelburne could now carry out his policy. This, however, he did not do, for his triumph was short lived. Lord Chatham continued to be ill, and without his leadership the ministry grew ever more and more feeble. Something desperate to repair its prestige must be done. Towards the end of the year 1767 began those changes which were to metamorphose the Chatham ministry into that of Lord North, to whose incapacity the United States of America form a living monument. Among the first changes made was the taking from Lord Shelburne of the control of colonial affairs. His successor was ignorant of American conditions and hostile to any measure which revealed the mind of Shelburne. Yet Shelburne's policy might have saved the British Empire, had it been followed.

I have given this narrative at some length to show how issues over the development of the Mississippi Valley divided not only British politicians but also British ministries. The decision to tax the colonies once more aroused to fever heat the political excitement in the colonies from New Hampshire to Georgia. Against the Townshend taxes were employed the

same popular meetings, the same petitions and remonstrances, the same agreements not to import British merchandise, and the same disturbances, acts of coercion, and riotings as marked the popular agitation against the stamp tax, but these now appeared in a more intense form. The colonies would not be taxed. This they declared in no unmistakable terms. When in 1770 there was a repeal of all the taxes except that on tea, this excitement calmed down; and cordial relations between the colonies and the mother country were in a large measure temporarily restored.

So far I have succeeded in tracing to an origin that was strictly western the two outstanding pieces of British legislation that angered the colonies. Let us now change our point of outlook from London to the colonies. Here we find that much of the violence of the colonies can be best explained by connecting happenings along the seacoast with those of the wilder frontier. Into the intricacies of the forces and emotions of the revolutionary psychology I cannot enter; but I do not wish to bring this paper to an end without indicating in a superficial way at least how the West entered directly into the lives of those men who made the Revolution a success and unquestionably became a factor in their personal attitude toward a movement which was so evidently leading the colonists toward revolt.

When I attempt to picture in my mind's eye eighteenth-century America, I see a line of stalwart men and women, dressed in buckskin and guernsey, armed with axes and guns; this line stretches along the eastern foothills that extend from Maine to Georgia, and all are crouching ready for a spring forward just as football players await the signal to rush into combat. They form the advance guard of the millions who are in the end to win for the world that fertile wilderness which is watered by the Mississippi and its tributaries. Many false starts were made, but the true signal rang through the valleys and along the mountain ridges in 1763 when the treaty of peace gave the eastern end of the Great Valley to the

British Empire. The men and women of the frontier in thousands scaled the mountain sides and rushed down the western slopes, each hoping to be the first to find the choice river bottom or grassy valley wherein to erect his cabin. Pittsburgh rapidly filled with a western population and became the center whence went forth groups of settlers in all directions.

Mingled with the seekers of farms were land-speculators and their agents, the surveyors, looking for areas where might be established towns and villages. Many of these had larger visions of money-making; they would build new colonies here in the Ohio Valley and around the Great Lakes, where they saw thousands and thousands of men would eventually find homes. The eighteenth century was a period of wild speculation in land. The modern man satisfies his gambling instincts in margins or in oil wells; his forefathers felt the same craving for a quickly secured wealth and satisfied this love of financial adventure by taking a flyer in land. And here, west of the mountains, lay the greatest and most fertile valley in the world waiting for the hand of man to work therein the miracle of civilization. Before that miracle was fully wrought fabulous sums would be made by men of foresight and luck. He who selected the site of a future great city might make his millions. The game was exciting and many prominent colonists entered into the sport.

The citizens of Virginia had a distinct advantage over their rivals, for their charter, granted in the generous measure of monarchs when giving something the value of which they did not appreciate, gave to them boundaries which extended west and northwest in such a manner that the Old Northwest as well as Kentucky apparently was to be dominated by the men of the Old Dominion. Of course there were other colonies which claimed part of this extensive domain, but Virginians happened to be first on the ground and were pressing their rights. Washington, the Lees, Patrick Henry, and many others of less fame became the leaders of Virginia's army of

land-speculators. Economic pressure pushed them ever westward. The land of tidewater Virginia had become worn out by the raising of tobacco, and the population had shifted first to the piedmont region, and now it was seeking for new land across the mountains.

There were many men who looked with disapproval upon the claims of the Virginians. Citizens of such colonies as Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New Jersey, with established western boundaries, realized fully the advantage that would accrue to the more southern colony if she were permitted to exploit the vast West. Both financially and politically, Virginia would overshadow the other colonies. They therefore put forth the claim and developed a line of arguments to prove that the colonies all ended at the mountains or thereabout; and that the beyond was imperial soil which should be divided into new colonies, wherein these men of the more narrowly circumscribed colonies could find expression for their love of speculation. One of the foremost and most notable of these small colony leaders was Benjamin Franklin, who, finding it a slow process to accumulate wealth by following his motto of saving a penny, entered into successive extensive land speculations in the West. With Franklin were associated some of the largest merchants and influential politicians of Pennsylvania and New York.

This doctrine of an imperial domain was naturally popular with the British ministers, particularly when a number of them were let in on the ground floor of a promising speculation. The financial possibilities dangled before their eyes by Franklin and his associates made very clear the necessities of enforcing the royal claims against Virginia and of developing the West under imperial auspices. The plan was to erect a new colony by the name of Vandalia out of what is today West Virginia and eastern Kentucky in such a manner that a western boundary along the mountain divide would be firmly established for Virginia. The project was endorsed both by the ministry and by the king; and the only reason for its final failure was the outbreak of the American Revolution.

Tories were few in number in Virginia, when you compare their number with those in Pennsylvania and New York. Here is something to think about. Have you ever wondered why the men of Virginia, both those of property and those prominent in politics, almost unanimously took sides with the patriotic cause and thereby made it a success? Why was it that Virginia furnished the leaders of the Revolution, men like Henry, Washington, and Jefferson, whose adherence to the side of the colonies meant the difference between success and failure? Why was it that such men were to be discovered almost solely in the Old Dominion? Their counterparts in the other colonies, save in Massachusetts, risked life and property by adhering to the cause of the British Empire.

The problem is a complex one and cannot be given a simple answer. No one force will account for the cross currents of the political life in Virginia; but it is certain that the wiggle woggle of the imperial policy concerning the opening of the West, followed as it was by the final decision to erect a boundary for Virginia on the west, stirred up a popular discontent, particularly among the members of that class which led public opinion, the planters. In the make-up of Virginian popular psychology the anger at the imperial plans for the West is an important component.

The only enemies of Virginia's claim to the West were not the imperialists of the smaller colonies and their ministerial friends. About the year 1772 there was handed around among American land-speculators a copy of an opinion of two famous lawyers of Great Britain, each of whom held at some time the position of lord chancellor. These distinguished legal lights declared that the tribes of the Indians were nations and that English courts would therefore be compelled to recognize as valid titles to land purchased from them. This opinion opened wide the door to speculators. Indian titles might cost some presents, some diplomacy, some bribery, and much rum; but they were relatively cheap and easily obtained. In the next two or three years many land companies were formed, and huge stretches of territory containing millions of acres were bought.

The first of such purchases was made by the Illinois Land Company of Pennsylvania. A couple of years later a purchase was completed by the Wabash Land Company of Maryland in modern Indiana, and another by the Transylvania Company of North Carolina in Kentucky. All these threatened the rights of Virginians; and the colony, and later the state, picked up the gauntlet thus thrown down by these speculators. The West must be saved from these greedy men. Out of the fight which ensued came the expedition of George Rogers Clark, which ended in the occupation of the Illinois country by Virginians. Although the expedition was directed primarily against the British, there was a strong element of Virginia's land-speculating interests in it.

Today we are not going to discuss this phase of the subject, but the purchase in 1773 of those large tracts by the Illinois Land Company had a direct influence upon the last effort of the British ministry to form a policy for the Mississippi Valley. At the moment when the news of the purchase in Illinois reached London the ministers had under consideration the future of the Province of Quebec, which had been suffering from a chaotic condition of its systems of law and religion ever since the conquest. This purchase of land by the Illinois Land Company in the Far West was contrary to the policy of the ministry in power at the time. They had been persuaded, by methods already described, to form the new colony of Vandalia contiguous to territory that had been populated; but they were determined to prevent white men from disturbing the equilibrium of Indian relations by lawlessly settling in the Far West.

Every effort so far made by the British administration to regulate conditions in the Old Northwest had failed. It seemed necessary that the power of Parliament should now be invoked. This had never been done for a purely western matter; but the reorganization of the Province of Quebec appeared to offer an opportunity. This French province was to have a centralized provincial government easily controlled

by the mother country. Let this provincial government guard Indian and imperial rights in the territory north of the Ohio River. For this purpose the region stretching to the Ohio and the Mississippi was added to Canada. Here was a simple solution. It was also supported by the powerful fur-trading interests of both the mother country and the colonies, for, since primeval conditions are necessary for the trade in furs, fur-traders may be depended upon to oppose all proposals looking to the extension of the settlements of white men.

So it was done. Just before the outbreak of the Revolutionary War the British ministry carried through Parliament the famous Quebec Act by which many perplexing questions concerning the West were supposed to be settled; but they did not understand colonial psychology. There was Virginia with her claim to this vast and fertile region which Parliament had casually taken away and placed within the boundaries of another colony. Is it a cause for wonder that the Quebec Act figures prominently as one of the causes for the colonial revolt?

We have passed in review the years preceding the outbreak of the Revolutionary War and have discovered that the roots of the revolt of the colonies were not confined within the narrow limits of the tidewater region, but that they stretched far back into the hinterland and found sustenance even beneath the primeval forests that lined the banks of the rivers Ohio and Mississippi. A history of the American Revolution can not now be written without taking full account of this influence of the Mississippi Valley, for from the beginning to the end, every important event presents to the historian a western side. It is no exaggeration to assert that the Revolutionary War was a phase of that momentous struggle for the conquest of the Great Valley carried on by the white men against the forces of nature, the opposition of the Indians, and the prohibitions of external authority.

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